

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 15544

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, VT, RH
SUBJ: TRIAL OF RHODESIAN BISHOP

FROM AMBASSADOR LODGE'S OFFICE

REF: ROME 15215

1. WE HAVE HEARD ON BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION NEWS PROGRAM OF SEPTEMBER 22 A REPORT TO THE EFFECT THAT TRIAL OF BISHOP LAMONT (REFTEL) IN RHODESIA HAD BEEN ADJOURNED FOLLOWING BRIEF COURT SESSION SEPTEMBER 21. ACCORDING TO THIS REPORT, DURING THAT SESSION BISHOP LAMONT ADMITTED GUILT TO TWO GOVERNMENT CHARGES -- (1) OF NOT HAVING REVEALED TO AUTHORITIES PRESENCE IN HIS DIOCESE OF GUERRILLAS AND (2) OF EXHORTING HIS PRIESTS TO FOLLOW THE SAME PRACTICE.

2. WE HAVE PASSED ON THIS REPORT TO THE BRITISH LEGATION TO THE HOLY SEE. BRITISH MINISTER VERIFIED REPORT AND IS NOW SEEKING AMPLIFY INFORMATION THROUGH HIS FOREIGN OFFICE. HIS INITIAL REACTION WAS THAT THIS CONSTITUTED AN AFFIRMATIVE DEVELOPMENT AND PERHAPS INDICATED THE RHODESIAN GOVERNMENT'S INTENTION TO DEFUSE ISSUE. SUCH A CONCLUSION ASSUMES, OF COURSE, THAT THE COURT WILL NOT IMPOSE THE SENTENCES WHICH THE LAW PROVIDES FOR SUCH
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CRIMES, THAT IS, OF UP TO 15 YEARS IN JAIL. THERE

IS A POSSIBILITY, OF COURSE, THAT THE GOVERNMENT MAY, IN VIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENTS OF THE LAST FEW DAYS, PRESS FOR A "SUSPENDED" SENTENCE OR SUSPEND CASE INDEFINITELY. ACCORDING TO VATICAN SOURCES, BISHOP LAMONT, WHO HAS BEEN BISHOP OF UMTALI SINCE 1957, IS VERY POPULAR WITH THE BLACK MAJORITY OF RHODESIANS. SINCE 1971 HE HAS BEEN A SEVERE CRITIC OF THE GOVERNMENT'S RACIAL POLICY AND HAS OPENLY DENOUNCED THE INJUSTICES WHICH SUCH POLICIES HAVE CREATED. UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, GOVERNMENT MAY DECIDE NOT TO PROSECUTE BISHOP AT A TIME WHEN IT IS CONSIDERING THE ADOPTION OF NEW DIRECTIONS IN ITS POLICY.

3. WHILE AT VATICAN ON ANOTHER MATTER SEPT 22, ACTING FOR MIN SILVESTRINI ASKED WHETHER WE HAD RECEIVED ANY RESPONSE FROM WASHINGTON TO REFTEL. WE REPLIED IN NEGATIVE BUT AT SAME TIME RELATED REPORT IN PARA 1 ABOVE. HE ALSO CONSIDERED REPORT AS AFFIRMATIVE DEVELOPMENT, BUT WAS ANXIOUS TO HAVE ADDITIONAL DETAILS. SINCE HE KNOWS THAT US HAS NO OFFICIAL PRESENCE IN RHODESIA, HE DID NOT PRESS US AND HOPES TO OBTAIN MORE INFORMATION THROUGH BRITISH OFFICIAL CHANNELS. VOLPE

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